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# BAUDELAIRE AND HIS LETTERS

BY ARTHUR SYMONS

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## I

IN their later work all great poets use foreshortening. They get greater subtlety by what they omit, and suggest to the imagination. Browning, in his later period, suggests to the intellect, and to that only. Hence his difficulty, which is not a poetic difficulty; not a cunning simplification of method like that of Shakespeare, who gives us no long speeches of undiluted undramatic poetry, but poetry everywhere like life-blood.

Browning's whole life was divided equally between two things: love and art. He subtracted nothing from the one by which to increase the other; between them they occupied his whole nature; in each he was equally supreme. *Men and Women*, and the love-letters, are the double swing of the same pendulum; at the centre sits the soul, impelled and impelling. Outside these two forms of his greatness Browning had none, and one he concealed from the world. It satisfied him to exist as he did, knowing what he was, and showing no more of himself to those about him than the outside of a courteous gentleman. Nothing in him blazed through, in the uncontrollable manner of those who are most easily recognized as great men. His secret was his own, and still, to many, remains so.

"His secret," I have said, "was his own, and still, to many, remains so." Exactly the same thing must be said of Baudelaire. He lived, and died, secret; and the man remains baffling, and will probably never be discovered. But, in most of his printed letters, he shows only what he cares to reveal of himself at a given moment. In the letters, there is much more of the nature of Confessions. Several of his letters to his mother are heart-breaking; as

in his agonized effort to be intelligible to her; his horror of her curé; his shame in pawning her Indian shawl; his obscure certainty that the work he is doing is of value and that he ought not to feel shame. Then comes his suggestion that society should adjust these difficult balances. Again, in his ghastly confession that he has sent Jeanne only seven francs in three months; that he is as tired of her as of his own life: there is shown a tragic gift for self-observation and humble truthfulness. It would have taken a very profound experience of life to have been a good mother to Baudelaire: or she should have had a wiser curé. Think of the curé burning the only copy of *Les Fleurs du Mal* that Baudelaire had left in "papier d'Hollande," and the mother acquiescing!

I give two quotations which certainly explain themselves, if they do not explain Baudelaire:

I must leave home and not return there except in a more natural state of mind. I have just been re-writing an article. The affair kept me so long that when I went out I had not even the courage to return, and so the day was lost. Last week I had to go out and sleep for two days and nights in a hideous little hotel because I was spied on. I went out without any money for the simple reason that I had none.

Imagine my perpetual laziness, which I hate profoundly, and the impossibility of going out on account of my perpetual want of money. After I had been seeking money for three days, on Monday night, exhausted with fatigue, with weariness and with hunger, I went into the first hotel I came on, and since then I have had to remain there, and for certain reasons. I am nearly devoured, eaten, by this enforced idleness.

In a letter written in Brussels, March 9th, 1868, he says: "I have announced the publication of three fragments: *Chateaubriand et la Dandysme littéraire*, *La Peinture didactique*, and *Les Fleurs du Mal jugées par l'auteur lui-même*. I shall add to these a refutation of an article of Janin, one on *Henri Heine et le jeunesse des poètes*, and the refutation of *La Préface de la vie de Jules César par Napoléon III.*" Besides these on the cover of his *Salon de 1848* are announced: *De la poésie moderne*; *David, Guérin et Gerodet*, *Les Limbes*, *Catechism de la femme aimée*. On the paper cover of my copy of his *Théophile Gautier* (1861), under the title of "*Sous Presse*," are announced: *Opium et Haschisch, ou l'Idéal Artificiel* (which was printed in 1860 as *Les Paradis Artificiels: Opium et Haschisch*), *Curiosités Esthétiques* (which were

printed in 1868); *Notices littéraires*; and *Machiavel et Condorcet, dialogue philosophique*. Of these *Les Limbes* appeared as *Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857); *Les Notices littéraires* at the end of *L'Art Romantique* (1868); none of the others were printed, nor do I suppose he had even the time to begin them.

He might have written on Machiavelli a prose dialogue, as original, from the French point of view, as one of Landor's Imaginary Conversations. Both had that satirical touch which can embody the spirit of an age or of two men in conversation. Both had a creative power and insight equal to that of the very greatest masters; both had the power of using prose with a perfection which no stress of emotion is allowed to discompose. Only it seems to me that Baudelaire might have made the sinister genius, the calculating cold observation, of Machiavelli, who wrote so splendidly on Cesare Borgia, give vent to a tremendous satire on priests and Kings and Popes after the manner of Rabelais or of Aristophanes.

It is lamentable to think how many things Baudelaire never did or never finished. One reason might have been his laziness, his sense of luxury, and above all his dissatisfaction with certain things he had hoped to do, and which, likely enough, a combination of poverty and of nerves prevented him from achieving. And as he looks back on the general folly incident to all mankind—his *bête noire*—on his lost opportunities, on his failures, a sack of cobwebs, a pack of gossamers, wave in the air before his vision; and he wonders why he himself has not carved his life as those fanciful things have their own peculiar way of doing.

Baudelaire was inspired to begin *Mon Coeur mis à nu* in 1863, by this paragraph he had read in Poe's *Marginalia*, printed in New York in 1856: "If an ambitious man have a fancy to revolutionize, at one effort, the universal world of human thought, human opinion, and human sentiment, the opportunity is his own—the road to immortal renown lies straight open and unencumbered before him. All that he has to do is to write and publish a very little book. Its title should be simple—a few plain words—*My Heart laid Bare*."

With all his genius, Poe was never able to write a book of Confessions, nor was Baudelaire ever able to finish his. Poe, who also died tragically young, throws out a sinister

hint in these last words: "No man *could* write it, even if he dared. The paper would shrivel and blaze at every touch of the fiery pen."

Baudelaire's Confessions are meant to express his most inmost convictions, his most sacred memories, his hates and rages, the manner in which his sensations and emotions have fashioned themselves in his waking self; to declare that he is a stranger to the world and to the world's cults; to express, also, as he says: *ce livre tout rêvé sera un livre de rancunes*. It cannot in any sense be compared with the Confessions of Saint Augustine, of Rousseau, of Cellini, of Casanova. Still, Baudelaire had none of Rousseau's cowardice, none of Cellini's violent exultations over himself and the things he created; none of Casanova's looking back over his past life and his adventures: those of a man who did not live to write, but wrote because he had lived and when he could live no longer.

In Baudelaire's notes there is something that reminds me of Browning's lines:

Men's thoughts and loves and hates!  
Earth is my vineyard, these grew there;  
From grapes of the ground, I made or marred  
My vintage.

For so much in these studies in sensations are the product of a man who has both made and marred his prose and poetical vintage. He analyses some of his hideous pains; and I cannot but believe—I quote these words from a letter I have received from a man of sensitive nerves—that he may have felt: "it *is* so beautiful to emerge after the bad days that one is almost glad to have been through them, and I can quite truthfully say I am glad to have pain—it makes one a connoisseur in sensations, and we only call it pain because it is something that we don't understand." Without having suffered intensely no poet can be a real poet; and without passion no poet is supreme. And these lines of Shelley are not only meant for himself, but for most of us who are artists:

One who was as a nerve over which do creep  
The else unfelt oppressions of this earth.

There is also something Browning says of Shelley which might be applied to Baudelaire's later years: "the body, enduring tortures, refusing to give repose to the bewildered

soul, and the laudanum bottle making but a perilous and pitiful truce between these two." He was also subject to that state of mind in which ideas may be supposed to assume the force of sensations, through the confusion of thought with the objects of thought, and excess of passion animating the creations of the imagination.

## II

How commonly we hear it remarked that such and such thoughts are beyond the compass of words! I do not believe that any thought, properly so called, is out of the reach of language. I fancy, rather, that where difficulty in expression is experienced there is, in the intellect which experiences it, a want either of deliberateness or of method. For my own part, I have never had a thought which I could not set down in words, with even more distinctness than that with which I conceived it: for thought is logicalized by the effort at written composition. There is, however, a class of fancies, of exquisite delicacy, which are not thoughts, and to which, as yet, I have found it absolutely impossible to adapt language. Yet, so entire is my faith in the power of words, that at times I have believed it possible to embody even the evanescences of fancies such as I have described. Could one actually do so,—which would be to have done an original thing,—such words might have compelled the heaven into the earth.

Some of these qualities Baudelaire finds in Gautier; to my mind there are many more of these strange and occult qualities to be found in Baudelaire himself. I have said somewhere that there is no such thing, properly speaking, as a "natural" style; and it is merely ignorance of the mental process of writing which sometimes leads one to say that the style of Swift is more natural than that of Ruskin. Pater said to me at Oxford that his own *Imaginary Portraits* seemed to him the best written of his books, which he qualified by adding: "It seems to me the most *natural*." I think then he was beginning to forget that it was not natural to him to be natural.

Gautier had a way of using the world's dictionary whose leaves, blown by an unknown wind, always opened so as to let the exact word leap out of the pages, adding the appropriate shades. Both writers had an innate sense of "correspondences" and of a universal symbolism, when

the "sacredness" of every word defends one from using it in a profane sense. To realize the central secret of the mystics, from Protagoras onwards, the secret which the Smaragdine Tablet of Hermes betrays in its "As things are below, so are they above"; which Boehme has classed in his teaching of "signatures"; and Swedenborg has systematised in his doctrine of "correspondences," one arrives at Gérard de Nerval, whose cosmical visions are at times so magnificent that he seems to be creating myths, as, after his descent into hell, he plays the part he imagines assigned to him in his astral influences.

Among these comes Hoffmann, in his *Kreislarian*, that Baudelaire read in the French translation I have before me, printed in 1834, where he says: "The musician, whose sense of music is conscious, swims everywhere across floods of harmony and melody. This is no vain image, nor an allegory devoid of sense, such as composers use when they speak of colors, of perfumes, of the rays of the sun that appear like concords." "Color speaks," says Baudelaire, "in a voice evocatory of sorcery; animals and plants grimace; perfumes provoke correspondent thoughts and memories. And when I think of Gautier's rapidity in solving all the problems of style and of composition, I cannot help remembering a severe maxim that he let fall before me in one of his conversations: "Every writer who fails to seize any idea, however subtle and unexpected he supposes it to be, is not a writer. *L'Inéprisable n'existe pas.*" And one has to beware of the sin of allegory, which spoils even Bunyan's prose. For the deepest emotion raised in us by allegory is a very imperfectly satisfied sense of the writer's ingenuity in overcoming a difficulty we should have preferred his not having attempted to overcome.

Then there is the heresy of instruction—*l'hérésie de l'enseignement*—which Poe and Baudelaire and Swinburne consider ruinous to art. Art for art's sake first of all; that a poem must be written for the poem's sake simply, from whatever instinct we have derived it; it matters nothing whether this be inspired by a prescient ecstasy of the beauty beyond the grave, or by some of that loveliness whose very elements appertain solely to eternity. Above all, Verlaine's: *Pas le couleur, rien que la nuance!*

The old war—not (as some would foolishly have it defined) a war between facts and fancies, reason and

romance, poetry and good sense, but simply between imagination which apprehends the spirit of a thing and the understanding which dissects the body of a fact—the strife which can never be decided, was for Blake the most important question possible. Poetry or art based on loyalty to science is exactly as absurd (and no more) as science guided by art or poetry. Though indeed Blake wrought his *Marriage of Heaven and Hell* into a form of absolute magnificence, a prose fantasy full of splendid masculine thought and of a diabolical or infernal humor, in which hells and heavens change names and alternate through mutual annihilations, which emit an illuminating, devouring, and unquenchable flame; he never actually attained the incomparable power of condensing vapor into tangible and malleable form, of helping us to handle air and measure mist, which is so instantly perceptible in Balzac's genius, he who was not "a prose Shakespeare" merely, but rather perhaps a Shakespeare in all but the lyrical faculty.

I have sometimes amused myself by endeavoring to fancy what would be the fate of an individual gifted, or rather accursed, with an intellect very far superior to that of his race. Of course he would be conscious of his superiority; nor could he (if otherwise constituted as man is) help manifesting his consciousness. Thus he would make himself enemies at all points. And since his opinions and speculations would widely differ from those of all mankind, it is evident that he would be considered a madman. How horrible such a condition! Hell could invent no greater torture than that of being charged with abnormal weakness on account of being abnormally strong.

Even when Baudelaire expresses his horror of life, of how abject the world has become, how he himself is supposed to be "une anomalie," his sense of his own superiority never leaves him. He declares his thirst of glory, a diabolical thirst of fame and of all kinds of enjoyments, in spite of his "awful temperament, all ruse and violence"; and he can say: "I desire to live and to have self-content. Something terrible says to me *never*, and some other thing says to me *try*. *Moi-même, le boulevard m'effraye.*"

### III

Here are certain chosen confessions of Baudelaire:

For my misery I am not made like other men. I am in a state of



spiritual revolt; I feel as if a wheel turns in my head. To write a letter costs me more time than in writing a volume. My desire for traveling returns on me furiously. When I listen to the tingling in my ears that causes me such trouble, I can't help admiring with what diabolical care imaginative men amuse themselves in multiplying their embarrassments. One of my chief preoccupations is to get the Manager of the Théâtre Porte-Saint-Martin to take back an actress execrated by his own wife—despite another actress who is employed in the theatre. . . .

I can't sleep much now, as I am always thinking. *Quand je dis que je dormirai, demain matin, vous devinerez de quel sommeil je veux parler.*

This makes me wonder what sort of sodden sleep he means. Probably the kind of sleep he refers to in his Epilogue to the *Poèmes en Prose*, addressed to Paris:

Whether thou sleep, with heavy vapours full,  
Sodden with day, or, new appparelled, stand  
In gold laced veils of evening beautiful,  
I love thee, infamous city! Harlots and  
Hunted have pleasures of their own to give,  
The vulgar herd can never understand.

The question comes here: How much does Baudelaire give of himself in his letters? Some of his inner, some of his outer life; but for the most part, "in tragic hints." Yet in the whole of his letters he never gives one what Meredith does in *Modern Love*. That poem, published in 1862, remains Meredith's masterpiece, and will always remain so, beside certain things of Donne and of Browning: an astonishing feat in the vivisection of the heart in verse. It is packed with imagination, but with imagination of so nakedly human a kind that there is hardly an ornament, hardly an image, in the verse: it is like scraps of heart-broken talk, overheard and jotted down at random. These cruel and self-torturing lovers have no illusions, and their tragic hints are like a fine, pained mockery of love itself, as they struggle open-eyed against the blindness of passion. The poem laughs while it cries, with a double-mindedness more constant than that of Heine.

#### IV.

The life of Baudelaire, like the lives of Balzac and of Villiers and of Verlaine, was one long labor, in which time, money and circumstances were all against him. "Sometimes," Balzac cries, "it seems to me that my brain is on fire. I shall die in the trenches of the intellect." It is his

genius, his imagination, that are on fire, rather than his sleepless brain. This certainly Baudelaire never felt. Yet, in one sentence written in 1861, I find an agony not unlike Balzac's, but more material, more morbid: "La plupart des temps, je me dis: si je vis, je vivrai toujours de même, en damné, et quand la mort naturelle viendra, je serai vieux, usé, passé de mode, criblé de dettes; ajoute à cela que je trouve souvent qui on ne me rend pas justice, et que je vois que tout réussit à souhait pour les sots." This, with his perpetual nervous terrors, his hallucinations, his drugs, his miseries, his women, his wine, his good and bad nights, his sense of poisonous people, his disorders, his excitability, his imagination that rarely leaves him, his inspiration that often varies, his phrase, after a certain despair: "Je me suis précipité dans le travail: alors j'ai reconnu que je n'avais perdu aucune faculté"; his discouragements, his sudden rages, not only against Jeanne, but when he just refrains from hitting a man's face with his stick: after all this, and after much more than this, I have to take his word when he says—not thinking of these impediments in his way—"What poets ought to do is to know how to escape from themselves."

ARTHUR SYMONS.